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Religious Ideology and Terrorism: Anthropological Considerations

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3.9. Religious Ideology and Terrorism: Anthropological Considerations (Alan Sandstrom)

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Executive Summary

Ideology has often been implicated in violent, radical movements (Rapoport, 1984) and since 9/11, much attention has been devoted to the ideological underpinnings of violent Jihadist groups and others (Atran, Axelrod, & Davis, 2007; Habeck, 2006; Jurgensmeyer, 2004; Ranstorp, 2004; Schbley & McCauley, 2005; Stern, 2003). Scholars and other experts hardly agree on the role religious ideology plays in non-state violence. Is it cause or consequence, after-the-fact justification, or simply a rhetorical rallying call? In this paper, I will examine how anthropologists have defined religion and ideology, and consider its role in violent movements. In this brief essay, I will make the case that the concept of religious ideology is imprecise and because of this analytical imprecision, its usefulness as an aid to understanding people's shared thoughts and values is severely limited. Furthermore, I will assert that the concept should never be used to account for or to explain people's behavior. I will suggest that a better way to think about different religious traditions and the groups of people immersed in them is derived from a research strategy in anthropology called "cultural materialism" (Harris 1979). Cultural materialism avoids explanations based on ideology and concentrates instead on the pragmatic, day-to-day circumstances that condition people's actual behavior.

The phrase "religious ideology" is often used loosely in anthropology and in casual conversation to refer to the set of socially shared ideas associated with a given religion. Thus, people talk and write about the religious ideology of Islam or Christianity as if a distinctive set of ideas or beliefs characterizes the one religion in opposition to the other. Furthermore, these imputed characteristic ideas and beliefs are often used by analysts to account for certain forms of behavior engaged in by followers of a religious tradition. For example, people often say that Catholics have more children than Protestants because their religious ideology leads them to regard birth control as sinful and it is therefore avoided. Major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism have features that make them relatively easy to identify. They are religions whose beliefs, rituals genealogies, stories and poetry are documented on sacred writings and they hold meetings in designated churches, mosques,

synagogues or temples, follow a yearly schedule of rituals, and have identifying symbols such as the cross or crescent moon.

Anthropologists have had a difficult time precisely defining religion in such a way that it applies to all of the nearly 6,000 cultures in the world. Religions vary enormously and it has proven to be a great challenge to find common elements that distinguish the religious realm from other areas of life. Anthropological expert on religion, Anthony F. C. Wallace, defines it as "a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature" (1966:107). In an effort to distinguish religion from other aspects of culture, he listed the minimal categories of religious behavior. In any given culture, these behaviors are "combined into a pattern that is conventionally assigned the title 'religion'" (Wallace 1966:52). Wallace's 13 categories (1966:53-67) include:

- (1) Prayer: addressing the supernatural
- (2) Music: dancing, singing, and playing instruments
- (3) Physiological exercise: the physical manipulation of psychological state (use of drugs, sensory deprivation, mortification of the flesh, deprivation of food, water, or air)
- (4) Exhortation: addressing another human being
- (5) Reciting the code: mythology, morality, and other aspects of the belief system
- (6) Simulation: imitating things
- (7) Mana: touching things
- (8) Taboo: not touching things
- (9) Feasts: eating and drinking
- (10) Sacrifice: immolation, offerings, and fees
- (11) Congregation: processions, meetings, and convocations
- (12) Inspiration (revelation, conversion, possession, and mystical ecstasy)
- (13) Symbolism: manufacture and use of symbolic objects

These elements are commonly found in the widest sample of religions throughout the world but there is no limit on how these individual behaviors may be expressed. In all cases, a careful distinction must be made between the official doctrines of a religion and the actual behaviors and beliefs of people. Not only do the behaviors vary widely, but religious ideology also varies enormously within a given religious system. Many investigators, including some anthropologists, assume a regularity of belief and practice among members of a culture that is simply not the case. For example, for the Nahua people, among whom I have conducted ethnographic research since 1970, there exists a wide range of beliefs and ritual practices connected to their religion (Sandstrom, 1991). Some people are true believers who are literalists while others range from skeptics to outright atheists. Like people anywhere, the Nahua love to discuss religious matters but no two people are in complete accord. There are generally agreed-upon principles, for example, that the earth is a sacred being that the sun provides the energy

animating the universe, and that corn is the basis of human life. However, these are rather generalized beliefs that overlap with a Western scientific understanding of how nature works. If people in small, remote villages exhibit such a wide range of beliefs, those in cultures following a world religion are even more diverse. There is no reason to believe that people in other cultures are more uniform in their religious ideology than are the people in any Euro-American society. Even in evangelical and fundamentalist Christian religions, great diversity of opinion and commitment should be assumed unless proven otherwise. The same is true for Islam, which is practiced under several major schools of thought with many variations within each.

Not only are religious ideologies diverse and their meanings varied, but religious as well as political ideologies are loaded with fail-safe, flexible definitions, appeals to authority, ad hominem arguments, tautologies, metaphysical leaps of faith, ranges of emotional responses, unproven - and unprovable - assumptions, and self-fulfilling prophecies. The amorphous nature of these two ideological realms means that they can blend into one another such that a strictly political position can be linked to religious fervor and vice versa. This is clearly the case with the use of religion by Islamic radicals and violent extremists (Sageman, 2008). Religious ideologies can be utilized to serve a number of social functions that have nothing to do with religion itself. For example, religion may be claimed as the basis for class or ethnic identity, justification for racial oppression or, equally, civil rights movements, engagement with or escape from the world, saving or taking of human life, and the rationale for imperialist or anti-imperialist movements. In sum, religious ideology or, for that matter, any ideological system can be used to serve any conceivable end.

People often attribute their own behavior or that of others to ideological motives. However, in general, people everywhere live their lives as a totality and do not distinguish among their activities and beliefs as being economic, political, or religious. Activities and ideologies interpenetrate and it can be difficult to draw lines between them. Most people have a clear idea of their religion and feel that it underlies everything they do. They insist that religious values cannot be singled out from other aspects of their lives. For example, many Protestants define meaningful work as kind of sacred enterprise that is linked to salvation.

Based on longstanding traditions in Western philosophy, ideas and ideologies are understood by people to have a saliency that transcends mere material conditions. However, a tautology underlies this type of explanation. Religious ideology is understood by what people say and do, and simultaneously, their behavior is explained as being the result of ideology. Based on my study of several world and traditional religions (Sandstrom, 1991), it is my contention that ideology is often so amorphous, flexible, unstable, and frankly incoherent that it has little explanatory power in and of itself. What does explain behavior is reference to the daily and pragmatic material conditions that people face in their lives. In this view, terrorism in the Middle East is not caused by the radical ideology of a sect of Islam but rather by the material conditions that people experience. These conditions can include economic deprivation, military conquest, political repression, environmental degradation, market dynamics, blocked social mobility, or any number of on-the-ground, empirically verifiable, and measurable factors (Gurr & Moore, 1997; O'Neill, 2005; Thomas, Kiser, & Casebeer, 2005). Outside analysts as well as the people who engage in terrorist acts may use religious ideology as an explanation or justification for their own behavior or to condemn a behavior in others. As stated above, religious ideology can be and are used to justify almost any range of behaviors. Islamic peace activists justify their actions using the same religious sources as the terrorists. What has caused

the ideology to be used in one particular manner rather than in some other way? Analysts should look to material conditions to find the answer to this key question.

The perspective that ideology does not account for people's behavior (including collective violent behavior) but that their material conditions often do, derives from a research strategy developed by anthropologist Marvin Harris (1979) called cultural materialism. Cultural materialists search for causative explanation of human behavior in the material conditions and context of people's lives. One important theoretical contribution from cultural materialism is the critical distinction between so-called "emic" and "etic" perspectives. The terms derive from the terms "phonemic" and "phonetic" employed by linguists to distinguish sounds recognized by speakers of a language from those recorded by scientifically trained outside observers of the language. The emic perspective takes the point of view of people in the culture engaging in the behavior to be explained. The etic perspective on the behavior takes the point of view of observers who abide by the internationally agreed-upon canons of scientific research. The etic perspective is verified by how well the explanation conforms to operational empirical scientific standards and is capable of generating additional hypotheses. Emic and etic perspectives are often identical. However, when they differ significantly, it is a sign of the degree to which people in the culture are mystified by the behavior in question. Terrorists who use religious ideology to justify their actions and the analysts who agree with them are employing an emic explanation. It is the responsibility of the social scientist to determine if there are etic conditions that better explain the causes of the behavior. Empirical research that is scientifically verifiable is accumulating, which uncovers these underlying conditions such as discrimination, political repression, relative deprivation, occupation, and political instability (Asal & Blum, 2005; Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008, 2009; Ivanova & Sandler, 2006; Kuznar, 2007; Kuznar, et al., 2009; LaFree, Dugan, & Franke, 2005).

In conclusion, anthropologists have learned a great deal about the world's religions but there is no common agreement about how best to understand or explain them. The perspective brought by cultural materialism assigns causal priority to the material conditions in which people behave and live their lives. In this perspective, religious ideology derives from the material context and should not be used to explain any specific kinds of behavior from terrorism to patriotism. Idea systems associated with religions are flexible and capable of being used to justify any number of behavioral responses. Thus, analysts should identify material causes that lead one interpretation of religious ideology to predominate over others at a specific time and place. Religious ideology should be implicated in explanatory theories only after all materialist factors have been eliminated as causal factors.

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